Chapter 7

Fixed and Manipulated Temporal Frames: Procedural Analysis of Students’ Perceptions of Electronic Time on the Discussion Board

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on evaluating the temporal rhythms of written messages on an asynchronous discussion board in a distance learning class, and it provides a blueprint for the analytic process. In order to assess the method, data is drawn from a distance learning course in a graduate institution in the Northeast region of United States. 322 messages written on Blackboard by 41 students were framed by an Aristotelian spatio-temporal terminology (chronos, kairos, chora, and topos). The research identifies different ways to analyze time and points towards the necessity to contextualize it in space/place and content. Mixed methods of analyses are applied: basic descriptive statistical temporal analysis is employed by the use of bar charts, figures, tables; and content analysis (modified version of Practical Inquiry Model) is used for the detection of higher order thinking’s relation to time and space. Finally, the study elaborates on the pedagogical benefits of the analyzed spatio-temporal rhythms through themes such as momentum, dialogic communication, time lags, while making connections between temporal clusters and dialogic communication, critical thinking, and spatial expansion. Students manipulate temporal rhythms, on one hand, they establish their own nonlinear and continuous chronological clusters of time, or on the other hand, they are unwilling to escape imposed temporal structures.

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of distance learning in higher education cannot be ignored. Research on faculty, students, and leaders of academic institutions portrays a mixed reality, as each human component of higher education engages and perceives online instruction in a slightly different way. Statistics show a 10% increase in online student population during 2011, which surpasses greatly the less then one percent growth of the overall enrollment in post-secondary education. Supply on the faculty part and demand from the students’ side, is quite contradictory: 31% of post-secondary education students participate in at least one online course in 2011, and 32% in 2012, however, less than one-third of faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education, a percentage that changes little over the past decade (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

In 2012, the number of faculty members who accepts distance learning courses, decreases. Chief academic officers report that 30.2% of their instructors value and consider online learning as a legitimate instructional experience. To these numbers are added anecdotal stories from several faculty members throughout the United States who demonstrate their reluctance in transmitting their knowledge from well-practiced traditional classroom delivery to an electronic format. In the latest report regarding online learning in the United States, faculty members’ views greatly differ from that of the leaders of their institution. The Babson Research Group’s tenth annual survey illustrates a great increase in chief academic officers’ perception of the quality of online education: in 2012, 77% of them rate distance learning outcomes the same or superior to face-to-face instruction, as opposed to 57.2% in 2003. It is not surprising that 69.1% of academic leaders consider it a long-term goal to incorporate online courses into their institution’s future (Allen & Seaman, January 2013).

As more and more students are taking online classes, chief academic officers see it as strategically important to offer distance learning courses, while faculty question the validity of online education. These engagement differences should be seen as complimentary since institutions are acting upon students’ demands. As registration in courses increases in a short period of time, it is inevitable that questions arise about the legitimacy of the newly gestated pedagogy. Distance education is faced with the urgency to develop methodologies for research and methods of analysis so that online educators can accept and provide pedagogically sound instruction that are seen as competitive with the traditional “tried and true methods” polished throughout centuries (Jenkins, December 10, 2012). In addition, growing concerns about the lack of self-discipline amongst students could be remedied by carefully designed guiding strategies born out of reliable research.

Given the above-discussed survey report, how can educators/researchers contribute to the formulation of online pedagogy? In what ways can a researcher provide guidance for educators in order to enhance distance learning? What is the
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